

The University of Chicago

THE CULT OF VOLTAIRE TO 1791
A REVOLUTIONARY DEITY, 1789—MAY 30, 1791

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
SOCIAL SCIENCES IN CANDIDACY FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

1935

By

RAYMOND OXLEY ROCKWOOD

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CHAPTER VII

A REVOLUTIONARY DEITY, 1789 - MAY 30, 1791

Although enthusiastic followers virtually deified Voltaire before 1789, they admired him primarily as one who personified "philosophy." His enemies contended that he had become a God, but they were certainly wrong if they thereby meant that a religion had been created around his name, for the external evidences of a religion - a system of rites constructed upon definite symbolisms - were clearly lacking. During the Revolution such a system of rites did evolve as an expression of the growing spirit of national patriotism; and it was only as a part of that development that Voltaire's cult attained a position of close approximation to a definitely established religion.¹

After 1789, as a natural consequence of the Revolution, a French nationalism was more definitely cultivated and more deliberately nourished than ever before. Through it the new regime sought to attain the moral unity of the nation. Previously this unity had been provided by the monarchy and the Catholic religion. But the king was now only a servant of the state, and the fundamental hostility between the church and the reformers, which became increasingly evident, made it impossible for many citizens to find religious inspiration in orthodoxy. In 1789 most Frenchmen were still Catholics, at least in form. The spread of philosophy had not necessarily implied the complete overthrow of Rome's moral

¹On cults: Archives nationales, F1c Series; F. A. Aulard, *Le Culte de la raison et le culte de l'Être Suprême, 1793-94* (3d ed.; Paris, 1909); Albert Mathiez, *Les Origines des cultes révolutionnaires (1789-92)* (Paris, 1904).

authority. The church, however, was so integrated with the ancien régime that its vested interests, in common with those of the monarch and the aristocracy, were unavoidably attacked by the third estate.

The National Assembly was cautious not to tamper with the spiritual position of the Catholic Church which it still regarded as the traditional moral basis of French society. On the contrary, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy (1790) established even closer relationships between the church and state, although the equilibrium had been disturbed to the disadvantage of the former in temporal affairs. Almost inevitably, this ancient institution refused to accept changes which violated century-long principles of opposition to lay control in religious affairs and to democratic forms of organization. It was discovered that catholicism could not be used as a means of harnessing the emotions of the people to the ideals of the new order,¹ for priests, like the aristocracy and the foreign foes, were interested in overthrowing the reformed state. Furthermore, since all religious sects were tolerated, it was imperative that some means be found of maintaining the spiritual unity of the nation and the allegiance of the populace to the changed constitution. The cult of national patriotism was the spontaneous answer.²

During the early years of the Revolution, the new religion, whose origins would have to be sought before 1789, grew hand in hand with orthodoxy. Clergymen, for instance, openly participated in the civic festivals. But as hostility to the church increased, these fêtes became lay in character. Probably the first important

¹Gabriel Monod, "Preface," Albert Mathiez, Contributions à l'histoire religieuse de la Révolution française (Paris, 1907), p. vii.

²Ibid., pp. 20-21.

completely lay celebration was the pantheonization of Voltaire in Paris (1791), the culmination of the process we are about to describe.

From the start the principles of the Revolution had become objectified in various symbols which were revered as sacred. There were innumerable new sacred objects, such as the models of the Bastille carefully designed by Palloy, patriot. The Declaration of Rights and the Constitution became holy documents to be revered. Great days, such as that of the destruction of the Bastille, replaced the holidays of the orthodox church. The virtues expected of a true citizen and the ideals for which revolutionaries were ready to die all found objectification in symbols. The Cocarde or tricolor flag, and autels de la patrie were concrete representations of the Revolution as a whole. Liberty had its arbres and its bonnets. Equality found its emblem in the carpenter's level, while fraternity was symbolized by clasped hands. The wide-awake citizen was depicted through the oeil de la surveillance or the rooster.

These symbols became the standards of the new cult of nationalism. When orthodoxy turned reactionary, patriots, such as Robespierre and Hébert, were to use them as the bases for a new form of worship. Far from trying to destroy religion in the broadest sense of the word, these reformers were really attempting to transfer faith in a cult which seemed hostile to the new state to one which was friendly to the new order. They were aiming to redirect the forces of religion.

The cult of the Revolution never matured into a unified, well-organized religion with a clearly defined creed and a systematized ceremonial, selected from the symbolisms developed after 1789. There are numerous evidences, however, that this was the tendency. The emotional basis for the new religion was found in

the fanatical devotion of the patriots to the new ideals and was demonstrated in the assaults upon the symbols of orthodoxy. The intolerance of a youthful creed was expressed in the willingness of patriots to punish, even by death, those who refused to recognize the obligatory character of the new philosophy.

Besides sacred things, sacred documents, sacred days, and sacred ideas, a need was also felt for sacred heroes, martyrs to the cause of the Revolution. Without some authority any religion is incomplete. This authority could be found in the leaders of the Revolution. But these leaders, in turn, relied upon the example and words of the great writers and leaders of antiquity, upon the precepts and actions of the founders of the new republic established in North America and upon the teachings of the French philosophes. To quote a Greek patriot, to cite an American example, to appeal to the views of Voltaire or Rousseau was equivalent to proving a point. Antiquity, America, and the French philosophes were convenient weapons in the hands of revolutionary propagandists, sufficiently adaptable to be serviceable upon all occasions. They were capable of taking on new meaning as circumstances required, but were ever present as an impressive body of authority.

If some patriots could glorify antiquity and the new republic in America, it was natural they should deify those within their own country who might be considered responsible for the development of the new gospel in France. Great philosophers of ancient days and of America were worthy of notice and emulation, but great Frenchmen had a far more personal appeal to the average citizen. Consequently, Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Mably and others of their contemporaries were established as the modern prophets of the new philosophy. The Abbé Fauchet declared that it was the philosophes (whom he named, omitting Voltaire) and "other great

writers" who prepared the "renovating institutions of the peoples."¹ When the work of the National Assembly was completed, M. André, moving for adjournment, stated that the deputies had accomplished what they had originally undertaken, namely, the task "of reducing to law all the wishes which philosophy had formulated."² Even opponents of the new institutions referred to revolutionaries as the "capricious emulators of the Voltaires and the bad interpreters of the Rousseaus."³ Both friends and enemies of the new régime cited the philosophes - Voltaire among them, as we have seen - as authority in the National Assembly, in the journals, and in the other literature of the period. They were repeatedly declared to be the real authors of the Revolution, the men who had prepared the way by enlightening their nation. They were installed as public examples of good citizenship.

Each of these Frenchmen, however, was separately honored and had his own followers and disciples. Each was regarded by a certain group as the symbol or interpreter of the new national faith. Some of Jean-Jacques' enthusiasts, for instance, were somewhat out of sympathy with the honors accorded Voltaire:

If the merit of an author is to make his ideas penetrate the soul of his admirers so that even after his death his mind seems still alive, it must be admitted that no one has greater merit than Voltaire. It is known that with extraordinary talent he neglected none of the little artifices used by mediocre authors to make people talk of him. Well! one would certainly believe that he was still living. Look at the public papers, people talk of no one but him; cities, departments dispute among themselves over his body as if he should cause as many miracles as the left leg of Saint Ovide and the tail of the pig of Saint Anthony. No one disputes over our good Rousseau. Alas, this is because he wished only for the happiness of humanity, because he consecrated his whole life simply to this cause without

¹Bouche de fer, Vol. II, No. 7 (Jan. 17, 1791), p. 103.

²Journal de Paris, No. 263 (Sept. 30, 1791), p. 1071.

³Gazette des cours de l'Europe, le royaliste, ami de l'humanité, No. 29 (Dec. 9, 1790), p. 113.

devotees; he felt that it was necessary to have a soul composed of fire and probity to qualify as his eulogizer; furthermore, he saw but few people capable of praising him. Poor Jean-Jacques! people admire you, but the severity of your principles frighten those men who are not yet worthy of loving you. . . Your glory is independent of mind; it is in the soul alone that it is fixed forever.¹

There were patriots, on the other hand, who could reconcile enthusiasm for the author of Contract social with that for the author of the Dictionnaire philosophique. Palloy, Bastille model-maker, confessed that in his imagination everything relating to the philosophe of Geneva seemed almost supernatural, and no other but Voltaire could inspire the same feeling in him.² That Voltaire and Rousseau had been enemies did not bother such individuals. Many believed the two had fought the same battle to realize the same principles, even though they might have employed different avenues of attack.

These cults of the different philosophes, of antiquity, of the American Revolution and of various civic virtues were not ends in themselves. They were not the objects of the supreme devotion of revolutionaries. Instead, they were subordinate cults which reflected honor upon the ideals of the Revolution itself. Just as a relic, a Saint Paul, or a Saint Mary is, according to Catholic dogma, each, in turn, worthy of a higher adoration, just as none of them is worthy of the supreme devotion due God, and just as the worship of all of them reflects honor upon God, so the worship of a Voltaire or of a Rousseau was subordinated to that of the Revolution.

The very priests of the Voltaire cult - those who took an active part in portraying him to the public - indicate this subordination of the cult of Voltaire to the cult of the Revolution.

¹Anonymous letter to the editor, Le Courrier de l'hymen, journal des dames, No. 26 (May 19, 1791), p. 101.

²Palloy to the Sections des postes, April 17, 1791: B.N., MSS., nouv. acq. fr. 312, piece 271.

Those who championed his cause were also champions of the constitution of 1791.¹ Did enthusiasm for the constitution inspire these individuals with enthusiasm for Voltaire? Or, did interest in the patriarch create love of the constitution? The cult of Voltaire was perhaps in part a cause of the reform psychology. Certainly his most active partisans had worked in his behalf long before 1789. On the other hand, his cult, as we discover it after 1789, indicates that its expression was to a large extent influenced by the Revolution itself.

How the cult of Voltaire was tossed about in the shifting currents of opinion during the years 1789 - 1791, remaining through out an integral part of the stream, is further illustrated by an analysis of the underlying attitudes of the period. Voltaire was adapted to the needs of the supporters of the National Assembly both on the question of despotism and on that of religion, to select only two major issues of the period. It was no hazard that his words were inscribed on new altars dedicated to the new revolutionary ideals.² For to those who worshipped at these shrines, he stood for the idea of a free people ruled by a citizen king. Late in 1790 what good patriot had not attended a performance of Brutus or had not heard it quoted, almost as a good Christian might quote Scriptures, as an unanswerable argument on critical occasions?³ But when some citizens turned against the king in 1791, they were able to find appropriate anti-monarchical texts in this play.⁴

The cult of Voltaire also reflected the changing religious psychology of these years. He was undeniably a symbol of anti-

¹Infra, pp. 146-51.

²Mathiez, Origines, pp. 30-31.

³Brutus was revived in Paris on Nov. 17, 1790.

⁴Albert Mathiez, Le Club des Cordeliers (Paris, 1910), pp. 50-51.

clericalism, his personal position being less enigmatic on religion than on political reform. Yet we shall discover that the Third Estate hesitated from the fall of 1789 until the spring of 1791 over the political expediency of officially honoring Voltaire, long since considered by the orthodox to be the chef des incroyables.¹ At first when every effort was still being expended to reconcile the church to recent reforms, it seemed indiscreet to antagonize the Catholics by paying tribute publicly to their enemy. It was not until the Catholic organization was hopelessly split between the jurors, those supporting the constitution, and the non-jurors, those refusing to do so; until the pope had anathematized the Revolution; and until indignation against the non-co-operative orthodox priests was roused to a Voltairean pitch, that the deputies voted to pantheonize the philosophe. Thus, Voltaire's chances of official recognition rose as the possibility of pacifying the clericals fell. By the spring of 1791 it was clear that the acceptance by the church of the so-called Civil Constitution of the Clergy was not to be expected.

At that moment, when conciliation with the non-jurors seemed impossible, Voltaire was the best symbol the supporters of the new religious institutions could have chosen to unite their partisans against their enemies. The orthodox reaction to the honors heaped upon him indicates this fact clearly. Anti-clericalism was not a new factor in the cult of Voltaire. But the tendency reached its greatest utility and its highest significance at the precise moment when the Revolution was moving into a strong anti-clerical phase.

In fact, the cult of Voltaire fits the circumstances of the year 1791 very well, if not completely. The relation of the king

¹Infra, pp. 153, 157-58.

to the constitution was in doubt. Voltaire was sufficiently vague on the question of the form of government to make it possible for a celebration in his honor to take even an anti-monarchical implication. Patriots were disgusted with the non-jurors and Voltaire was admirably anti-clerical. They needed symbolism and catchwords for the new civic religion to make their ideals more real. Attractively designed phrases deifying truth, liberty, equality and reason, were to be found in abundance in his works. They called for examples of good citizenship to represent the new patriotism in concrete form. This they discovered in Voltaire who had spent his life enlightening mankind and in alleviating the sufferings of the downtrodden and the persecuted. They searched for someone to typify the willingness of a citizen to sacrifice everything, even his life, for the cause. This they saw in the Patriarch of Ferney who had been pursued by hate and envy all his life, even to the grave. They desired someone who could symbolize the battle against the enemies of the Revolution. To honor Voltaire was to spite these enemies. To worship Voltaire was to worship the Revolution. A celebration in his memory could hardly have had a more appropriate setting.

In 1789 indignant Voltaireans still remembered that in 1778 the Paris clergy had rejected Voltaire's body and had refused it Christian burial in the capital. They recalled that only by a clever ruse had the philosophe's relatives been able to secure for his resting place a small plot of sacred ground in the chapel of the Bernardine monastery of Scellières. There the bones rested, undisturbed, until the National Assembly voted in 1789 for the nationalization of church property. The old controversy was at once renewed. What if this monastery were to be sold and the ashes of the Father of the Revolution were to pass into private hands?

This could not be. Steps must be taken immediately to reclaim the body. It must be brought back to Paris where reparation should be made for the treatment it received in 1778. The nation should unite in a solemn demonstration of gratitude to its benefactor. A pamphlet, written by the dramatist, M.-J. Chénier, had, in the summer of 1789, declared that the time had arrived for the acquittal of the nation's debt to Voltaire.¹ A veritable campaign was opened in the fall of 1789 by various contributors to the Chronique de Paris, such as St. Just, the Marquis de Ximénès, the Marquis de Villette, and Anacharsis Cloots.

Charles Villette (1736-1793), outstanding figure in the movement, was by rumor either a nephew or an illegitimate son of Voltaire (who had been a close friend of the Marquis' mother).² As a retired army officer and an amateur littérateur, Villette early gained a penchant for the new philosophy and ingratiated himself, through his charming manners and his ability as a conversationalist, with Voltaire, whom he twice visited. His fate was sealed on the occasion of his second visit (in 1777). It was then that this dissolute marquis (whose father had purchased the family title) met the young Mademoiselle de Varicourt, belle et bonne as Voltaire called her. The philosophe had recently opened his home to this girl and thereby had saved her from a convent to which she had been destined by a father of small means and large family. As a beautiful gesture of his enlightenment and as a demonstration of the fact that he had reformed, Villette arranged to marry the poor girl without dowry, as he could well afford to do, having inherited a large fortune. Like everything else concerning Voltaire, this

¹Dénonciation des inquisiteurs de la pensée (Paris, 1789), p. 43.

²"Villette," Biographie universelle (ed. Michaud); "villette," Nouvelle biographie générale (ed. Hoefer).

marriage received wide publicity and, La Harpe tells us, actually improved the marquis' standing with his fellow philosophes.¹ It was the marquis, among others, who urged Voltaire to return to Paris in 1778, and it was the Villette home on the corner of the Quai Malaquais and the rue des Theatins, where the sage had lived as a youth, that the latter used as headquarters during his last visit to the capital. Typical of his whole career, Villette was in 1778 the butt of devastating satires on his character and morals, his enemies charging that he was attempting to bask in Voltaire's glory.

After the philosophe's death both Villette and belle et bonne continued to be his most active partisans. Villette appropriated his heart, when the body was embalmed in 1778, with the tacit consent of Madame Denis, but against the wishes of the rest of the family; purchased Ferney from Madame Denis, much to the disgust of Voltaire's nephews; and proclaimed in the journals that he had erected an impressive mausoleum there as a shrine for the heart. Publicly at least, he tried to replace Voltaire as Seigneur de Ferney, but, if Wagnière's biased word is worth any credence at all, prosperity left the district with Voltaire's death.²

On the eve of the Revolution Villette once more came before the public by carrying on Voltaire's work. In December, 1788, he printed a letter in the Journal de Paris, calling attention to the serfdom which still existed in the Juras and demanding that the coming Estates General abolish this abomination first of all.³ His letter brought a reply of gratitude from one of the inhabitants

¹Jean-Fr. de la Harpe, Correspondance littéraire (Paris, 1804-1807), I, 203.

²Wagnière, "Additions au Commentaire historique," S. G. Longchamp and J. L. Wagnière, Memoires sur Voltaire (Paris, 1825), I, 64-66.

³No. 360 (Dec. 25, 1788), p. 1540.

of the region, thanking him for renewing the pleas of their "defender," Voltaire.¹ But it is quite evident that Villette's name did not carry much weight with the public authorities,² while he failed in his efforts to be elected to the Estates General. Freely expressing his opinion on a wide variety of subjects, Villette turned pamphleteer and correspondent for the Chronique de Paris. Always a Voltairean, he criticized the clergy severely. Quite apparently, he was interested in a political career, and even though one may admit his sincerity in promoting Voltaire's cause between 1789 and 1791, one is faced with the fact that he did capitalize upon the publicity he received. But just as he had been disappointed in his desire to be elected to the National Assembly, so he was defeated in his ambitions for a seat in the Legislative Assembly. In 1791 he ran for deputy in the department of Paris, but miscalculated, for in the attempt he turned down the chance to represent the department of Oise.³ It would seem that the electors of Paris were not impressed by his activity in behalf of Voltaire. Nevertheless, the department of Oise did send him to the National Convention where he came into conflict with the Jacobins. Had he not died from natural causes in 1793 he probably would have been guillotined.

It is not unlikely that Villette's activity in behalf of Voltaire during the years 1789-91 was greatly stimulated by the admiration of his wife for her benevolent patron. She was generally

¹Letter of Feb. 18, 1789, Journal politique de Bruxelles, No. 11 (March 14, 1789), pp. 75-76.

²See Papers of the Grande Chancellerie relating to the librairie, 1789-90, A.N., V¹, 549.

³Letters of M. le Clercq, elector of the department of the Oise, to the president of the electoral assembly, Sept. 4, 1791, Documents concerning the political, administrative and judicial elections of Paris, 1790 - An VII, A.N., B¹11.

considered Voltaire's adopted daughter, although this had never been legally arranged. She seems always to have held him in great esteem and, being of a religious nature, to have long doubted that the philosophe had written anything sacrilegious.¹ The measure of her veneration for Voltaire is indicated by the fact that she is said to have burned incense before his bust every day.² Virtuous and benevolent by nature, she tolerated her dissolute husband, who at least gave her social position, and devoted her energies to an ideal she had absorbed from her patron: la bienfaisance. Her charities were numerous³ and, though her husband was lampooned constantly, there was seldom anything but praise in estimates of her character and conduct.⁴ It was therefore not surprising that the Chronique de Paris should have given her major credit in 1791 for the success of the apotheosis movement.⁵ She christened her son, born in 1792, Voltaire-Villette.

Although none played such notable public rôles as the Villette, others participated in the campaign. Many of these had long been connected with the Voltairean tradition. The machinations behind the scenes are not at all clear. It is doubtful whether there was any organized group intriguing for vindication of Voltaire. Condorcet, who, among the younger generation of

¹"Villette," Biographie Universelle.

²"Villette, Marquise de," Nouvelle biographie générale.

³Lettres choisies de Charles Villette (Moutargis, 1790), pp. 17-18; Maurice Tourneux (ed.), Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique par Grimm, Diderot, Raynal, Meister, etc. (Paris, 1877-1882), XV (July, 1789), 492-93 (cited henceforth as Correspondance littéraire [Grimm]).

⁴Enemies of Voltaire, however, even attacked her reputation.

⁵No. 152 (June 1, 1791), p. 605.

philosophes, had been regarded as the hope of the sect by Voltaire, is almost never mentioned as playing an active part in the movement. Yet one hostile source charges that Villette and Condorcet sponsored the apotheosis for its publicity value, both hoping to be elected to the Legislative Assembly.¹ We discover that Condorcet was present at a meeting of the Jacobins when Villette unfolded his plans in November, 1790, and that he spoke in behalf of Voltaire.² He was a member of the Société de 1789, to which Villette also belonged. We know that he was connected with the Paris city government in the spring of 1791 when the commune was won over to Villette's program. But what did he actually contribute to the endeavor? We have nothing that he wrote on this subject under his own name. However, in expressing his gratitude for being elected by the department of Paris to the Legislative Assembly (1791), Condorcet was certainly thinking of Voltaire when he said: "Undoubtedly you have desired to honor through me the memory of the illustrious men whose friend I have had the good fortune to be and to recompense them, through a disciple they respected, for all they did to prepare and to accelerate the reign of reason and of liberty."³ Although Condorcet was constantly in the background, it is inconceivable that he did not lend the weight of his influence to Villette's project. Other old Voltaireans participated in the movement - Beaumarchais, editor of the Kehl edition of Voltaire's

¹"Mémoires de Marquis de Ferrières," Vol. I, Mémoires sur les assemblées parlementaires de la Révolution (Barrière and Lequire, "Bibliothèque des mémoires," Vols. XXXV-XXXVI [Paris, 1880-81]), XXXV, 493-94.

²Infra, pp. 156.

³Discours prononcés dans l'Assemblée électorale du département de Paris par M. les députés et députés suppléants, élus à l'Assemblée nationale législative en l'année 1791 (Paris, 1791), pp. 71-73: Documents pertaining to the department of Paris, A.N., AD, XVI, 67, dossier, "Seine, en général, 1789-1791."

works; Gudin de la Brenellerie, who fought Mably for his criticism of Voltaire's history; François de la Harpe, (as yet a philosophe) leader of the dramatists and editor of the pro-Voltairean Mercur de France; Antoine Boucher, author of the Poème des mois, parts of which, criticizing the fanatical priests for refusing to bury Voltaire in Paris, had been read before the Lodge of the Neuf Soeurs in 1778, and also one of the editors of the pro-Voltairean Feuille villageoise; the lawyer Charles Christin, friend and neighbor of Voltaire, who had acted as the executor of the latter's will and who represented the district of the Juras in the National Assembly and championed the rights of the serfs; and the Marquis Ximénès, friend and correspondent of Voltaire. New recruits to the cause of Voltaire had also been discovered. There was the radical Baron de Cloots; the dramatist M.-J. Chénier, self-confessed imitator of Voltaire; Palloy, patriot, who busied himself with making representations of the Bastille and was in touch with Villette during the preparations of the apotheosis. How closely these different individuals co-ordinated their activities is not evident. It is certain, however, that of all Villette was the most constantly in contact with the situation, and that no other journal devoted so much attention to its progress as the Chronique de Paris, to which Villette was a continual contributor (of which Condorcet was only later to be an editor) and from which other journalists, even in the provinces, copied. The only hint that the movement for vindication of Voltaire was engineered by an organized group is the fact that frequently different journals printed the same articles at the same time. Yet papers may have copied from one another or, at times, the same individual may have sent his articles to different editors on his own responsibility. This was probably true of Villette.

Until the late spring of 1790 it was hoped that Voltaire's body would be brought to Paris for a celebration on the twelfth anniversary of his death, May 30, 1790. An "inhabitant" of the parish of Saint-Roch in Paris claimed in 1791 that he had been the first to suggest that Voltaire's body be brought to the capital and placed in the Church of St. Sulpice. He stated that he had made this idea public in the Chronique du mois of September, 1789.¹ In October, 1789, Saint-Just, in the Chronique de Paris, maintained that the "ignominious blot" on the national honor, caused by the clergy in 1778, should be washed away by the commune of Paris.² The body of Voltaire should be brought to the city in funeral splendor, a magnificent ceremony should be held at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame and a monument erected in the Church of St. Sulpice by public contribution. The idea that the city of Paris should promote the honors and that Voltaire should be placed in St. Sulpice was rejected by Villette on December 21, 1789.³ He contended that the nation rather than the city should pay the tribute, that the body should be brought from Scellières in pomp and be placed in Ste. Geneviève, then considered France's newest and most beautiful church. The nation, he pointed out for the first time, had come into possession of Voltaire's body by appropriating church lands, and was therefore responsible for the disposal of the remains of one who "became the light of his century and caused that universal tolerance and that hatred of despotism which has served as a leaven for our glorious Revolution to enter the hearts of people." The germ of the apotheosis is to be found in this letter. But the suggestion was not welcomed by everybody. Villette complained:

¹Chronique de Paris, Vol. IV, No. 172 (June 21, 1791), p. 686.

²Ibid., Vol. I, No. 41 (Oct. 3, 1789), p. 163.

³Ibid., No. 119 (Dec. 21, 1789), p. 478.

I receive letters written anonymously and under pseudonyms which treat me severely with respect to the project I have conceived; that of bringing the remains of Voltaire to the Sainte-Genevieve. It is the tone of fanaticism and of personal outrage; it is the style of 1589.¹

The National Assembly was by no means prepared to accept Villette's idea. The orthodox opposition had already demonstrated its strength, for, when Palissot respectfully requested the privilege of dedicating his edition of Voltaire's works to the Assembly, the petition was ignored.² Barère de Vieuzac, leader of the center, defined the issue clearly: Should or should not the legislators ally with the principles expounded in such books?³ The leader of the orthodox Gallican clergy in the Assembly, François de Bonnal, Bishop of Clermont, announced that the whole collection was so replete with impurities as to make the stand of the church inevitable.⁴ Since the Third Estate was then co-operating with the First, it seems to have been feared that honors to Voltaire might complicate the religious situation. This probably prevented any serious consideration of Villette's project by the Constituent at the time.

Clerical opposition in the National Assembly did not dishearten the partisans of Voltaire. The Chronique de Paris published another letter of the Baron de Cloots on March 3, 1790, in which he expressed pleasure that "my idea regarding the translation of Voltaire's ashes is spreading with success in the capital."⁵ The date of the celebration, he indicated, should be May 30, 1790. But on May 27, 1790, he had to admit that, because of the "work on the social edifice," the solemn translation and the marble monument to

¹Ibid., Vol. II, No. 22 (Jan. 22, 1790), pp. 86-87.

²Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 (Ser. I 1789-1799 ; Paris, 1875-1914), Vol. IX (Sept. 25, 1791), p. 182.

³Le Point du jour, Vol. III, No. 90 (Sept. 26, 1789), p. 108.

⁴Arch. parl., Ser. I, Vol. IX (Sept. 25, 1791), p. 182.

⁵Chronique de Paris, Vol. II, No. 62 (March 3, 1790), pp. 245-46.

Voltaire in the Champs-Élysées, which he advocated, would have to be postponed for another year.¹ "But May 30, 1791, will be marked, I hope, by a true reparation of one of the greatest misdeeds of the former clergy." Temporary defeat was again admitted by Villette on May 30, 1790, and his statement on that occasion indicated clearly that there was really no unity in the plans of the partisans of Voltaire at that moment.² The only idea held in common by all was that Voltaire's body should be brought back to Paris and honored. How this tribute was to be executed was another matter.

Once more, however, Villette's proposals foreshadowed events. The glorious Revolution, he said, was the fruit of Voltaire's works. "If there had been no philosophes, fanaticism would still exist in the environs of the capital." Having taken the property of the clergy, the nation should make honorable amends to this great man. Voltaire's body should be brought in religious pomp from Scellières to Paris and then placed in a Pantheon. Following the example of the Greeks, Romans and English, the French should transform the new Sainte-Geneviève into such a Pantheon. "The pomp of the apotheosis of Voltaire would be the last sigh of fanaticism." He denounced the idea, advanced by some, of placing Voltaire in the Champ de la Fédération as more appropriate for a warrior than for a philosophe, while he refuted the suggestion that the sage be buried at the foot of Henry IV's statue, claiming that "Voltaire distributed glory and received it from no one." In almost all its general outlines, Villette's program was to be accomplished. This was probably the first mention of a proposal to transform the Ste. Geneviève into a Pantheon.

¹Ibid., Vol. II, No. 147 (May 27, 1790), p. 586.

²Ibid., No. 150, pp. 597-98.

Matters remained thus until November, 1790. At the First Federation commemorating the destruction of the Bastille, held on July 14, 1790, Voltaire's words were to be found inscribed upon the autel de la patrie.¹ During the same summer his name was involved in a public controversy between the patriotic and conservative elements within the Comédie over the presentation of Charles IX, Brutus, and La Mort de César.² The Civil Constitution of the Clergy became law in July and was resisted so strenuously by the orthodox clergy that on November 27, 1790 a law was passed requiring all priests to take an oath of allegiance to the constitution. This fight against le fanatisme on the part of the supporters of the new constitution was bound to remind them of an already famous fight by the chef des incrédules against the same monstre. Thus, November was a very appropriate time for Villette to renew his campaign. Strife between the two factions in the church had begun and the first performance since 1789 of Brutus had been announced for November 17, 1790.

The renewed efforts had their inception in the Société de 1789, a club of moderate reformers to which, as we have already pointed out, both Villette and Condorcet belonged. On November 9, 1790, the club sent a deputation to the commune of Paris demanding that the city take official steps towards the reclamation of Voltaire's body, but the only answer was Mayor Bailly's assurance that the matter would be given consideration.³ The request was either ignored or tabled, because the circumstances were not yet

¹Ami du roi, No. 49 (July 19, 1790), p. 202.

²Sigismund Lacroix, Actes de la commune de Paris pendant la Révolution (Paris, 1894-98), Ser. II, Vol. I, pp. 121, 209.

³Ibid.

propitious for its realization.

Sometime between November 3 and 10, 1790 - the sources are not clear - Villette carried his proposals before the Jacobins of Paris and begged their aid.¹ It is possible he appealed to them before November 9 in order to get their support for the deputation sent the Commune of Paris that day by the Société de 1789. He repeated his program, but added an indirect attack upon the Abbé Fauchet. This leader of the Cercle social had roused the ire of Voltaireans the previous month by declaring that "Voltaire was not a philosophe, he did nothing for the Revolution, he was a despicable being, an aristocrat, a mean individual. . . ."² Although we lack a detailed report of this meeting, it seems that Condorcet also made a speech in behalf of Voltaire. The general sentiment of those present was perhaps expressed by a Jacobin who affirmed that Voltaire had "founded the Revolution."

Further efforts were made by Villette to stir up enthusiasm for his cause when, on the night of the third representation of Brutus, November 22, he read a letter reiterating his demands for the creation of a Pantheon and for the transfer of Voltaire's ashes there.³ This plea reached more than those in the Comédie audience, since the Paris journalists reprinted it for the benefit of their subscribers.

Even though sentiment was growing in favor of Villette's plan, the proper moment for its fulfillment had not yet arrived.

¹Lacroix (Ibid., p. 233) gives the date as Nov. 9. 1790; F. A. Aulard, basing his judgment on a report of the Chronique de Paris (Nov. 12, 1790) would accept Nov. 10: Aulard, La Société des Jacobins, I, 367; the account of a German traveler present at the meeting gives Nov 3: Arthur Chuquet, Paris en 1790, voyage de Harlem (Paris, 1896), p. 294.

²J. Charrier, Claude Fauchet (Paris, 1909), I, 167; Bouche de fer, issues of Oct., 1790.

³Chronique de Paris, Vol. III, No. 329 (Nov. 25, 1790), p. 1314.

The Feuille villageoise was unable to understand how France could refuse a tomb to "the poet of tolerance" who had been persecuted and calumniated until his death by the "charlatans of the church," particularly since he had been eulogized by such enlightened rulers as Frederick the Great and Catherine II.¹

He has contributed more than any other to render our language the universal tongue. His mausoleum would attract the most learned pilgrims to the capital. No thinking being could resign himself to die without having visited the ashes of him who has done more than any one else to advance the human mind and the French Revolution.

Camille Desmoulins agreed.² Reactionaries, however, could not tolerate the sacrilegious idea of burying Voltaire in a church.

The Actes des Apôtres felt Beaumarchais' suggestion that Voltaire's grave be placed at the foot of Henry IV's statue was better than that of putting it "in a temple destined forever to celebrate the august mysteries of our religion."³ One "Active Citizen," with a Voltairean sense of humor, came to Cloots' defense.⁴ He thought it would be a splendid plan to erect statues to all the philosophes and place them in the Champs-Élysées. They would be made out of the kitchen utensils of the convents of Paris. This "pious work" would be accomplished by workers chosen indiscriminately from among the monks of all orders, keeping in mind that it would be just to give preference to "the generals, priors, provincials, superiors, visiteurs, guardians, and procurators of all types."

While the National Assembly was still hesitating, the public seemed to have become ready to honor Voltaire. His former hatter was so moved by Villette's scheme that he demanded the right,

¹No. 10 (Dec. 2, 1790), p. 187.

²Révolutions de France et de Brabant, Vol. V, No. 57 (n.d.), pp. 228-31.

³No. 229, p. 11.

⁴Le Rodeur réuni ou chroniqueur secret de la Révolution, No. 37 (n.d.), p. 442.

in view of the fact that he had cared for "that divine cranium which produced so many marvels," to accompany the procession to Scellières and back whenever it set out.¹ But, Villette replied to this enthusiast in December, 1790, stating that the Constituent feared the "loud cries the priests would make" should they decree the pantheonization of Voltaire.² They had not given up hope of reconciling the orthodox clergy to the Revolution.

As we have seen, interest in Voltaire did not lag because of the delay. Early in March, 1791, circumstances forced the Commune of Paris to take the first official step towards reclaiming Voltaire's body. The impending sale of Scellières, the place of the sage's burial, raised the issue. The monastery was situated within the limits of the little community of Romilly which had an active mayor named Etienne Favreau. This ambitious citizen labored strenuously to gain for his town the glory of guarding Voltaire's body until the National Assembly should come to some definite decision. But when he approached the committee on the constitution for permission to do so, he got no answer.³ Determined to accomplish his purpose, the mayor turned to Villette, setting forth the urgency of the situation. This impelled the marquis to bring pressure upon the Commune of Paris once more. He sent a letter, dated February 28, 1791, to Mayor Bailly of Paris, reminding him that the monastery in which Voltaire was buried would be sold in the near future and urging that the city of Paris act without delay to assert its rights to the body. To insure that this démarche would

¹Chronique de Paris, Vol. III, No. 343 (Dec. 9, 1790), p. 1370.

²Villette to Voltaire's hatter, ibid., Vol. III, No. 347 (Dec. 13, 1790), p. 1386.

³The story is recorded in the letter of Villette to Mayor Bailly, Feb. 28, 1791, ibid., No. 74 (March 15, 1791), p. 294.

bring happier results than that of the Société de 1789 the previous November, Villette added a threat. If some official action were not taken now, he said, "a great number of good citizens" would make an unofficial pilgrimage to Scellières as a demonstration. The letter was not in vain, for, on March 7, 1791, the municipal council of Paris heard it and appointed a committee to study and make recommendations on the proposal.¹ The committee was charged with formulating a report "on the means of transferring and of placing the ashes of Voltaire in a dignified manner in the capital." It included two of the council's members, Joseph Charon, representative from the district of Bonne-Nouvelle, and Jacques Cousin, representative of the district of Saint-Etienne-du-Mont and administrator of public works. The two began work as though the translation were a foregone conclusion. On March 9 Charon informed Villette that he and Cousin had been charged with doing "all that can be done with reference to your demand" and requested him to send his suggestions and those of his friends.²

The death of Mirabeau on April 2, 1791, enabled Voltaire's partisans to realize one of the cardinal points in their program: the creation of a Pantheon. The sudden loss of this outstanding orator and ardent champion of constitutional monarchy, who, next to Lafayette, probably ranked first among revolutionary leaders, was a great shock to the Assembly. Advantage was taken of this emotion to induce the deputies to create a French Westminster. It was the department of Paris rather than the municipality which pressed the issue. There is no indication that Charon and Cousin, the committee appointed the month before by the Commune of Paris, influenced Claude Pastoret, procureur général of the department of Paris, to

¹Lacroix, op. cit., Ser. II, Vol. III, p. 93.

²Ibid., p. 96.

appear before the National Assembly and present a petition (April 3). It is altogether likely, in the light of previous developments, that either the committee or Villette had inspired Pastoret to act.

This petition urged that the church of Sainte-Geneviève be reserved as a Pantheon, that the department of Paris be charged with remodeling the building, that the National Assembly determine who should receive national honors (i.e. burial in the Pantheon), that Mirabeau be judged worthy of them, and that, in the future, such men as Descartes, Voltaire, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau should also be considered for national recognition.¹ On April 4, 1791, the committee on the constitution reported in favor of Pastoret's recommendation, and the Assembly accepted the plan with slight debate.² Upon the façade of the basilica was to be engraved "Aux Grands Hommes la Patrie Reconnaisante."

Mirabeau was buried in the new Pantheon with due ceremony.

Whereas one could not question the power of the Assembly to secularize a church building at any time, the bitter quarrel between the juring and non-juring clergies, in progress during the spring of 1791, furnished an opportune moment for the act. As might have been expected, the decree was opposed by both friends and enemies of the Revolution.

The reaction of the orthodox section of opinion to this desecration of its most beautiful churches was a foregone conclusion. The structure, started in 1758 by order of Louis XV, intended to replace the old crumbling building, had been designed on classical

¹Arch. parl., Ser. I, Vol. XXIV, p. 536; the report of the department meeting which delegated Pastoret to appear before the Assembly may be found in Le Point du jour, Vol. XXI, No. 643 (April 4, 1791), p. 28.

²Arch. parl., Ser. I, Vol. XXIV, p. 543.

Greek lines by Soufflot.¹ It was the pride of the orthodox, having been erected to house the patron saint of Paris, Sainte-Geneviève. Construction had been completed in 1790. The decree of April 4, 1791 was thus equivalent to snatching candy out of a child's mouth. The Nouvelles ecclésiastiques spoke of the philosophes who had robbed the orthodox of their finest church, while a pamphleteer referred to the basilica as one "prostituted to the Voltaire and the Mirabeaus."² The reactionary Ami du roi, edited by Montjoye and Crapart, was virulent in its condemnation of the National Assembly:

Descartes lived and died in the bosom of the Catholic church. But Voltaire! and Rousseau!..we are not astonished at anything now. With constitutional bishops, what will people not undertake? Perhaps some day they will even dare place the bones of the Voltaires and the Rousseaus on our altars and recommend them to our veneration.³

Some patriots were equally opposed to the idea of a Pantheon. Marat, for instance, visualized the dark intrigues and cabals which would spring up in the future legislative bodies over pantheonizations.⁴ He was even more antagonized by the people selected for national honors by the National Assembly. In the fall of 1791, when there was rumor of bringing Rousseau's body to Paris, his blood was to boil at the thought of his hero "in the midst of contagious corpses (Mirabeau and Voltaire), of apostles of deceit, of apologists of despotism, of perverters of truth, of despoilers of the poor, of oppressors of the people."⁵

¹Julien Rospail, "Les Cendres de Voltaire et de Rousseau se trouvent-elles au Panthéon?" Mercur de France, Vol. CLXXVI, No. 635 (Dec. 1, 1924), p. 290.

²(Sept. 20, 1791), pp. 149-52.

³No. 95 (April 5, 1791), pp. 378-79.

⁴Ami du peuple, No. 420 (April 5, 1791), p. 8; ibid., No. 421 (April 6, 1791), p. 8.

⁵Ibid., No. 543 (Sept. 2, 1791), p. 7.

There were those who felt that other better locations could be found for monuments to France's great. The out-of-doors, particularly the Champs-Élysées, continued to seem a more suitable place for the tombs of men like Mirabeau, Rousseau and Voltaire. This plan, long advocated by Anacharsis Cloots, was seconded by Prudhomme.¹ The latter felt it "philosophical irony" to place heroes in a church and, in preference to the British Westminster, proposed the Greek custom of burying national heroes in the open. A professor of the Collège Louis le Grand, Louis J. S. Heron, in a pamphlet entitled Représentations d'un citoyen à la nation, also appealed to the example of the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans.² In the name of tolerance for orthodox, he felt it wrong to use a Catholic Church as a place of burial for the nation's great, who would be drawn from all faiths.

But many patriots favored the idea of a Pantheon. The Journal des clubs ou sociétés patriotiques, using the same arguments as the opponents, found that revolutionaries were only following in the footsteps of the Romans in the establishment of a Pantheon.³ "This monument will be for the great men of Paris what the Temple of Agrippa was at Rome for the Gods of the Empire."

The first plank in Villette's program was attained when finally the Pantheon was established. It was now but a question of time before the National Assembly would extend its privileges to Voltaire. In fact, the deputies had almost committed themselves to this policy, for in the decree concerning the church of Sainte-Geneviève, it was provided that the legislature should have the right to confer the national honors upon great men of France

¹Révolutions de Paris, No. 100 (June 4-11, 1791), p. 446.

²(Paris, May, 1791).

³Vol. I, No. 4 (n.d.), pp. 172-76.

deceased before 1789 (specifically naming Descartes, Voltaire and Rousseau). This provision, however, did not imply that action would be taken immediately. In fact, Rousseau had to wait until 1794. But Villette, writing on April 6, 1791, was confident that the pantheonization of Voltaire would occur shortly.¹ When he announced, about the same time, that he had changed the name of the Quai des Théatins to Quai de Voltaire, he appealed to the decree of the National Assembly "discerning public honors upon Voltaire" as sufficient authority for this arbitrary assumption of power.² His imagination seems to have stretched the law creating the Pantheon into one honoring Voltaire. He was not alone in this error. The Jacobins of the town of Sézanne voted at the end of April to send a deputation to Scellières to aid in the "transfer of Voltaire to Paris."³ The journal, La Vedette, on April 30, informed its readers that the monastery of Scellières would be sold shortly, that the municipality of Paris had claimed the body of Voltaire, and that it would send Charon to transport the corpse, probably on May 30.⁴ "Fourteen years have sufficed to uproot the prejudices of more than fourteen centuries."

Decisive action regarding the body became imperative when the sale of the monastery could no longer be deferred. Though Scellières was under the supervision of the little Commune of Romilly, without the support of Paris it could scarcely hope to

¹Lettres choisies de Charles Villette, p. 109.

²Villette made this announcement before the Jacobin Club of Paris on April 6, 1791: Revolutions de France et de Brabant, Vol. VI, No. 73 (n.d.), p. 372; the municipality of Paris ratified the change of name on May 3: Feuille du jour, No. 126 (May 6, 1791), p. 298.

³Journal des clubs ou sociétés patriotiques, Vol. II, No. 26 (May 6-12, 1791), p. 85.

⁴(April 30, 1791), p. 7.

cope with a rival claimant, the Jacobin Club of Troyes, for the possession of the ashes of the famed philosophe. Both Romilly and Troyes were situated in the department of Aube, southeast of Paris, and Troyes was the metropolis of that region. Romilly was a town of some two thousand inhabitants, only about two hundred of whom were sufficiently educated to write their own names.¹ But the municipality had evinced its patriotism from the beginning of the Revolution, and was led by an ardent Voltairean named Etienne Favreau, whom we have already met. This mayor was a personal testimonial to the spread of Voltaire's ideas in the rural districts. Writing Villette in April, 1791, he recounted the story of his own life:

You [Villette] who were his [Voltaire's] cherished disciple will learn with great pleasure that his writings have now spread to the most isolated sections of the countryside. I myself am a proof. Born of a poor day laborer who scarcely had sufficient means to teach me to read and to participate in the mass, I have never used, on questions of morality and on political matters, books other than the OEuvres of Voltaire.²

It has already been noted that in February, 1791, Favreau endeavored to get the constitutional committee to allow Romilly the privilege of retaining the sage's body until further action might be taken by the nation. Failing in this, he had written Villette, who induced the Paris municipal authorities to form a committee to investigate the problem. After the creation of the Pantheon, Villette requested Favreau to postpone the sale of Scellières until definite disposition had been made of Voltaire's body.³ On April 18 the mayor replied that the sale was scheduled for May 3, 1791,

¹Letter to the National Assembly signed by the municipal officers of Romilly, Dec. 3, 1789, Documents pertaining to the communes classified under the Comité des rapports. A.M., P. XXIX. 68, dossier 175, "Romilly."

²Chronique de Paris, Vol. IV, No. 116 (April 26, 1791), p. 461.

³J. Desnoiresterres, Voltaire et la société au XVIII^e siècle (2d ed.; Paris, 1871-1876), VIII, 479.

and urged that the city of Paris make good its claim to the remains.¹

Favreau made a great show of his admiration of the sage, but was anxious that speedy action be taken also for another reason. The Jacobin Club of Troyes presented with success its claim to a superior civic spirit. Consequently, it obtained, early in May, 1791, the consent of the departmental authorities of Aube to transfer Voltaire's bones to its city.² Facing the realities of the situation, Romilly, while feeling its right to the body better than that of Troyes, tried to effect a compromise with the Jacobins. It petitioned the procureur général of the department for permission to retain at least the head and right arm of the philosophe. The procureur declared such a division a "barbarous procedure" and instructed the commune to place no obstructions in the path of Troyes:

Certainly, it is a subject of profound reflection to witness a municipality quarrel over the ashes of Voltaire for the privilege of officially conferring upon them the honors of la béatitude. Nothing, in my opinion, indicates better the strange mental revolution which has taken place, [showing] that the constitution has placed centuries between the year 1791 and the year 1778. . . . This division of the remains of a famous mortal would be more in keeping with the politics of the court of Rome and would be valuable in the traffic of its favors; but this barbarous procedure is no longer in season. When religion, in harmony with liberty, will have consecrated Voltaire's tomb, he will belong to all mankind.³

Frustrated once more, Favreau hurried a messenger to Paris. On Sunday, May 8, 1791, Charon received the letter explaining the situation and the need for instant action.⁴

¹See note 2, p. 164.

²Albert Babeau, Histoire de Troyes pendant la Révolution (Paris, 1873-74), I, 439.

³Ibid.

⁴Lacroix, op. cit., Ser. II, Vol. V, p. 121.

Charon, on his own authority (for the Paris municipal council did not meet on Sundays), appeared before the National Assembly, reminded the deputies that Scellières would be sold and that, as a result of the quarrel between Romilly and the Jacobins of Troyes, there was danger that Voltaire's bones would be divided.¹ He asked that the remains of the great man be spared this fate and set forth the prior claim of Paris to them. The Assembly, he suggested, should order the Commune of Romilly to guard the philosophe's remains in its parish church until further notice. He begged to remind the deputies that the thirteenth anniversary of Voltaire's death would be celebrated on May 30, a day when "intolerance and fanaticism exercised their furor and their persecution against the Philosophe of Ferney." "May the same day be that of the triumph of philosophy, of reason and of justice."

Charon's suggestion was accepted, but not without some adverse debate.² The motion in favor of his proposal that Romilly be ordered to guard the body was put by Michel-Louis-Etienne Regnaud, moderate constitutionalist representing Saint-Jean d'Angely. The remains of the man who enlightened his fellow citizens, he said, belonged to all of France and could not be appropriated by any part of the empire. The Assembly should prevent the division of the body. By touching only indirectly on the question of awarding Voltaire the honors of the Pantheon, he intimated that the idea was still under consideration, and that the deputies were not yet prepared to go on record as paying tribute to the chef des incrédules. Both Jean-Baptiste Treilhard, who had been active in the reorganization of the church, and Charles Christin, formerly

¹Arch. parl., Ser. I, Vol. XXV (May 8, 1791), p. 661.

²Ibid.

personal friend of Voltaire and executor of his will and now deputy from the Jura region, supported the motion, reminding the Assembly that Voltaire had predicted the Revolution. The proposal called forth prolonged protests from the right. A former professor of law, Jean-Denis Lanjuinais, tangling his dates in his effort to dampen the enthusiasm of the sage's partisans, informed the members that "a celebrated writer," Bayle (who had died when Voltaire was yet a boy) had said, "Voltaire merits the thanks, but not the esteem of mankind." An agriculturalist named Martin Gombert grumbled the equivalent of a curse upon the sage, while Abbé Jean Couturier, a former Jesuit, suggested that since Voltaire had been likened to a prophet, his relics should be sent to Palestine. This caused laughter on the right and murmurs on the left. Reporting the incident, the Ami du roi recorded that Treilhard, with a menacing air, stammered out certain insults against the right which could not be heard except for one word which was quite distinct: fanatics!¹ In the end, the Commune of Romilly was ordered to transport Voltaire's remains from Scellières to its parish church, while the constitutional committee of the Assembly was requested to consider the advisability of bringing the body to Paris.

Learning of the Assembly's wish on the morning of May 10, Romilly, with a mixture of joy over the possibility of spiting Troyes and of pride over the privilege of according its hospitality to the remains of the great Voltaire, executed the orders that very afternoon.² Had the decree arrived two hours later, Favreau wrote, the body of Voltaire would have been carried off to Troyes.³ An

¹Ami du roi (Montjoye and Crapart), No. 129 (May 9, 1791), pp. 514-15.

²Extract from the registers of the Commune of Romilly, May 10, 1791, J. F. E. Robinet, Le Mouvement religieux à Paris pendant la Révolution, 1789-1801 (Paris, 1896-1898), I, 533-35.

³Chronique de Paris, Vol. IV, No.134 (May 14, 1791), p.534.

elaborate procession of municipal officials, national guards, and enthusiastic citizens wended its way to the monastery of Scellières. The coffin was opened and the body examined by doctors who reported certain bones in the feet missing (to cover the fact, one authority claims,¹ that admirers on this occasion helped themselves). Voltaire's remains were exposed to the crowd and then solemnly transported to the parish church, where an appropriate religious service was held. The coffin was sealed and then placed under careful guard. From May 11 until July 5 fourteen men watched over it day and night (at national expense).² "Two thousand arms would be necessary to deprive us of this treasure." Thus Romilly possessed Voltaire's whole body two months, but Troyes secured one of his bones forever, for it seems that his first metatarsal was ultimately (1845) donated to its museum.³ The decree was executed five days before it had legally become law; the king's signature was not placed upon it until May 15.

Using every opportunity to display hospitality, the mayor and municipal officers of Romilly held a service in memory of Voltaire on May 20.⁴ The vice-president of the department of Aube spoke on this occasion, saying that he and his deputation had come to render homage "to the memory of one of those rare geniuses whom France will forever pride herself for having produced." All citizens, he claimed, were anxious to pay the national debt to Voltaire,

¹C. F. Albert Babeau, l'Exhumation de Voltaire (Troyes, 1874), cited by Robinet, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 534, n.l.; see also n. 3 below.

²Romilly's expense account for the translation, Documents concerning the Sainte-Genevieve or Pantheon, 1791-An IV, A.N., F131136.

³Amédée Aufauvre, "Translation de Voltaire à l'abbaye de Scellières," Annuaire administratif, statistique et commercial du département de l'Aube pour 1857 (Troyes, 1857), p. 128.

⁴Mercure universel, IV (June 6, 1791), 86-87.

a man worthy of praise on many grounds, but one most revered by patriots because "it is he who prepared the reign of liberty." "In fact, Messieurs, is it not he who first opened your eyes, who taught you your rights, who traced the route by which you have succeeded in recovering them?" Such veneration of Voltaire seemed ridiculous to Fontenai, the editor of the Journal général.¹ He remarked that while ten years before people revered only the bones of saints, they had now come to worship those of one who ridiculed the cult of the saints. "If he [Voltaire] still laughs in the other world, it is possible that he is today coining epigrams against the little municipality of Romilly which just solicited the honor of possessing his ashes."

About the middle of May, 1791, it seems to have been the general impression that Voltaire's body would be brought to Paris on the thirteenth anniversary of his death, May 30, 1791. Dutiful citizens broke into print enthusiastically with pet notions which they considered essential if Voltaire were to be honored adequately. The columns of the Chronique de Paris were opened to such discussions almost daily. The Bouche de Fer declared that "the enthusiasm of the French over the transfer of the mânes of Voltaire to the capital is at its peak."² According to the Courrier de Provence, no Frenchman was more worthy of honors granted by a regenerated patrie.³ These comments were accompanied by encomiums of Voltaire, which had merely been accentuated by the hostility of those in the National Assembly who had opposed the decree of May 8. An anonymous writer in the Chronique found in this opposition but one more reason why "good patriots, loyal to the Revolution and to

¹No. 99 (May 9, 1791), p. 392.

²No. 55 (May 11, 1791), p. 262.

³Vol. XVI, No. 270 (May 8-13, 1791), p. 41.

the constitution, should unite in a body to honor him to whom we are indebted for both."¹ The attitude of the antagonists caused La Harpe to publish two articles in the Chronique. One of these was reprinted separately, probably during the month of May, under the title, Les Bienfaits de Voltaire envers le bon peuple français.² The author saw no reason to be alarmed at "a few individual protests, voiced in the National Assembly, as if these protests, to which we are accustomed, could counter-balance the majority public opinion."³

The opposition could not be silenced. "In fact, who would not murmur," said one editor, "after seeing the impolitic and impious obstinacy with which men, who have disowned and blasphemed the God adored by the people, are constantly set up for the admiration of the populace?"⁴ One would imagine, remarked another, somewhat less hostile, that this was an affair of state upon which the salvation of France depended. Why all this fuss?⁵

To worship a morsel of immovable and lifeless matter; useless to humanity as a whole. What does one admire in a great man? The productions of his genius and his mind. It is consequently these which should be preserved. . . . Modern philosophes you therefore also have prejudices. Ah! that is unworthy of the excellence of your moeurs and of your regeneration.

That the National Assembly should waste its time on such inconse-

¹Vol. IV, No. 135 (May 15, 1791), p. 538.

²The article in issue No. 135 (May 15, 1791 , pp. 537-38) is signed by La Harpe; that in No. 140 (May 20, 1791 , pp. 557-59) resembles the first article, but is anonymous; the latter is identical with the anonymous pamphlet, Les Bienfaits (n.p.n.d.); all three are so similar that one suspects that they are by La Harpe.

³Les Bienfaits, pp. 5, 15.

⁴L'Ami du roi (Montjoye and Crapart), No. 129 (May 9, 1791), pp. 514-15.

⁵Gazette des cours de l'Europe, le royaliste, ami de l'humanité, No. 73 (May 12, 1791), p. 289.

quential matters also disgusted Linguet.¹ At a period when the whole nation was demanding the completion of the constitution, to concern themselves "so pompously with the pretended rehabilitation of a dead person who certainly was not dishonored and to lose several sessions in discussing and fixing its details," was in his opinion "either an inexcusable neglect of the dignity of their functions or a criminal abuse of our confidence." Yet, if the disturbance of a skeleton seemed a worthy matter to the deputies, they ought to leave it to the next legislature:

Is it hands full of the plunder from the clergy which should sign the law conferring divine honors on the most violent enemy which the clergy has had? Is it appropriate for those men whom people accuse, unjustly or not, but at any rate, whom people accuse, of wishing to destroy religion, -- is it appropriate that they sanction the apotheosis of the one among all other men who has done the most damage to religion?

How much such criticism contributed to the hesitation of the National Assembly is not clear. At any rate, by May 29 it had not yet gone on record in favor of the pantheonization of Voltaire. The Voltaireans were nevertheless undaunted. Caron de Beaumarchais, an active member of the newly formed Société des Auteurs Dramatiques, was pressing Voltaire's cause among his fellow dramatists.² At a meeting of the executive committee of the society on May 9, he announced that Voltaire's body would be brought back to Paris in the near future "to receive finally the honors which are due to the most courageous defender of the rights of humanity; to one of the most proud inspirers of the love of liberty; [and] of that sublime love to which we owe all the beautiful constitution under which we are about to live." After giving considerable

¹Annales politiques, civiles et littéraires de Linguet, Vol. XVII, No. 169 (May 26, 1791), pp. 449-62.

²Motion faite par Pierre-Augustin Caron Beaumarchais, au comité des auteurs dramatiques pour aller au devant du convoi de Voltaire, le 9 mai 1791 (n.p.n.d.).

detail regarding his own relations with Voltaire, Beaumarchais moved that the society as a group receive the revered body at the barrier of Paris when it arrived and that a deputation be sent to Romilly to accompany it all the way. The executive committee voted to accept this suggestion, but when it came to naming the deputation of six, it was found that all members of the association were not quite of Beaumarchais' opinion, for three of those designated refused to serve.¹ Similarly, the Cercle social voted to send a delegation to Romilly, and, being anxious for the celebration to take place, sent a second deputation to inquire the date of the event from Villette.²

On May 29, 1791, Villette announced that preparations for a ceremony were advancing without the authorization of the Assembly.³ Despite certain resistance to the work which had been encountered, he promised "de grandes choses." "That solemn occasion will be worthy of the fine days of Greece and Rome," he wrote. It would be necessary, however, he continued, to postpone the celebration from May 30 to June 15, but this would merely add to its significance. "This should be the resurrection of Voltaire, May 30 is but the day of his death." Such sacrilegious remarks caused consternation among the more orthodox, particularly after the details of the fête became known. But Villette envisioned even greater things for this tribute to Voltaire. It was to be a national event which would not only unite all patriots about the constitution, but which would also reconcile the aristocracy to the new régime. He appealed to them:

¹Chronique de Paris, Vol. IV, No. 154 (June 3, 1791), pp. 614-15.

²Bouche de fer, Vol. IV, No. 58 (May 26, 1791), pp. 349-50 and No. 61 (May 31, 1791), p. 16.

³Chronique de Paris, Vol. IV, No. 149 (May 29, 1791), pp. 594-95.

And you, my dear fellow citizens, who have deserted your hearths, renounce hatreds. . . . Desert the flags of discord and come and range yourselves under the colors of philosophy. Voltaire was your friend; his works enchanted your youth and will always be your delight. In vain do people want to frighten you with the people of Paris. They welcome great men and know how to honor talents and virtues. Come in order to witness the homages which will be discerned to the most beautiful genius of the universe; and swear, on his tomb never again to separate from your brothers, from your friends.

Finally on May 30, 1791, the report of the committee on the constitution was presented to the National Assembly by its chairman, Pierre-François Gossin.¹ It recommended that Voltaire's body be placed in the Pantheon. There was surprisingly little debate. Gossin depicted Voltaire as one who had "prepared men for tolerance," who had striven to make the lot of his fellowmen more bearable, and who had earned the title of "liberator of thought." The oration was received with applause and ordered to be printed. When Regnaud endeavored to amend the motion of the committee, by adding that a statue of Voltaire should be constructed at public expense, it became evident from the debate that the Sage of Ferney was not the only philosophe who had claims upon the sympathy of the deputies. Claude d'Eymar, an ardent follower of Rousseau and author of several books on him, demanded to know why the statue of Rousseau, already ordered by the Assembly, had not been executed; Louis Prugnon, a lawyer particularly interested in judicial reform, asserted that Montesquieu was just as worthy of such an honor; Charles Chabroud, jurist and patriot, amid applause, spoke in behalf of Mably. All these proposals were referred to the committee.

It is worthy of note that Voltaire was not the first philosophe to be honored by the National Assembly. As early as June 22, 1790, a bust of Rousseau and a copy of the Social Contract had

¹Arch. parl., Ser. I, Vol. XXVI (May 30, 1791), p. 610.

been presented to the Assembly by Barère de Vieuzac.¹ On November 29, 1790, on the motion of d'Eymar, the statue of Rousseau, to which, as we have seen, he later referred, had been decreed and a copy of his Emile placed in the archives.² Except for the session in the fall of 1789, when Palissot's dedication was rejected,³ Voltaire's name does not enter the debates as an object of proposed national recognition until the spring of 1791.

Just why Villette and other friends of Voltaire had to wait from May 8 until, as we have noticed, May 30 for the National Assembly's decree authorizing the pantheonization is not clear. Contemporary accounts do not allow us to see what happened in the intervening days. Certainly fear that such a step would have alienated the pope could not have caused hesitation, for the news that the latter had anathematized the Revolution (Bull of April 13, 1791) was already known in France early in May. While the insult to the pope, when he was burned in effigy at the Palais Royal (May 3, 1791), was the reason for the papal nuncio's decision to leave Paris, it was only by a peculiar coincidence that he departed on May 31,⁴ the day after the decree honoring Voltaire had been passed. The most plausible explanation for the delay is that the whole question was considered of secondary importance in the face of the many more perplexing problems before the Assembly and the committee (such as the problem of the annexation of Avignon), and therefore, was side-tracked temporarily. It so happened that as May 30 was the thirteenth anniversary of Voltaire's death it turned

¹Ibid., Ser. I, Vol. XVI, p. 414.

²Ibid., Ser. I, Vol. XXI, p. 127.

³Supra, p. 153.

⁴F. A. Aulard, Le Christianisme et la Révolution française (Paris, 1925), pp. 62-63.

out to be an appropriate time for the representatives of the nation to honor the philosophe.

It is not hard to understand why Voltaire's body was pantheonized at this time while that of Rousseau had to wait several years. The latter was quite satisfactorily buried at Ermenonville, long a pilgrimage center for ardent Rousseauists, whereas his friends were firmly opposed to any disturbance of his grave located quite appropriately in natural surroundings and on private property. On the other hand, the sale of monastic lands made the fate of Voltaire's remains uncertain. More importantly, the circumstances of Voltaire's death enabled his followers to propagandize for a transfer of his body. This propaganda fit quite conveniently into the anti-clerical orientation which the Revolution had been taking, particularly since the orthodox clergy had refused to take the oath of allegiance to the constitution. Thus, the principles of the Revolution called for a vindication of Voltaire's suffering, while the confiscation of the church lands furnished the opportunity.

Voltaireans were naturally elated over the authorization of May 30 which was regarded as the culmination of their endeavors. Prudhomme found it difficult to believe there were deputies "barbaric" enough to oppose the plan.¹ According to Villette, Voltaire had no need of a decree to place him among great men, although, the marquis said, it was vital to the honor of the Assembly that it go on record against "all the outrages committed against reason in the person of a single individual."² The Bouche de fer predicted that the apotheosis would be "a certain mark of our regeneration,"³

¹Révolutions de Paris, No. 100 (June 4-11, 1791), p. 446, note 1.

²Lettres choisies de Charles Villette, p. 174-75.

³Vol. IV, No. 62 (June 1, 1791), p. 16.

while the Courrier de Provence could not resist observing that "all the enemies of the Revolution were also the persecutors of Voltaire."¹ The public owed gratitude to the deputies, maintained the Point du jour, for avenging Voltaire of that "atrocious and shameful persecution" on the anniversary of the day it was committed by "fanaticism, hypocrisy and intolerance."² Most enthusiastic, however, was the Chronique de Paris, leading organ championing Voltaire's cause.³ The decree, it anticipated, would be the final blow to fanaticism, whose ravages were still evident in the royalist journals. "Let us announce to all France, even to our neighbors, that finally public gratitude is going to discern to an ordinary individual, a more honorable and merited triumph than is given conquerors." The transfer of Voltaire would cause a general frenzy and be designed "to deposit in all souls germs of life and emulation." This ceremony, "this pomp, this public expression of gratitude which discharges the national debt, this triumph of reason over errors and impostures" was largely the work of Madame de Villette, good natured pupil of Voltaire, who had always radiated "truly filial piety," a "warmth of sentiment" and a "religious affection" for her patron. Honorable mention is also given her husband, Charles Villette, and Charon, the municipal officer, for services performed in the campaign.

But opinion was far from unanimous in acclaiming the decree of May 30. Even Prudhomme warned the public not to be distracted from the more important problems of the moment by any civic festivals, no matter how justifiable they might be.⁴ "Eh! pour dieu,"

¹Vol. XVI, No. 274 (May 30, 1791), p. 190.

²No. 688 (May 31, 1791), p. 532.

³Vol. IV, No. 152 (June 1, 1791), p. 605.

⁴Révolutions de Paris, No. 100 (June 4-11, 1791), p. 540.

exclaimed the Creuset, "conscript fathers, you have a nation to remake and you amuse yourselves at playing the monkey."¹ Counter-revolutionaries regarded the act as a direct affront to religion. Mademoiselle de Givry foresaw in the pantheonization of Voltaire another farce similar to the one enacted for Mirabeau, characteristic of the "irreligious delirium" of the day.² The Ami du roi of Montjoye and Crapart could find no room in its pages to contradict Gossin's assertion that France and Europe as a whole were indebted to Voltaire for services rendered humanity, merely allowing space to point out that "all honest people have long had a clearly defined opinion regarding him; while admiring a part of the productions of his mind, no one but regards him as one of the greatest corruptors of the simplicity of moeurs and of the religion of our ancestors; people know that he has, on the whole, done much more harm than good."³ The situation was analyzed in greater detail in Royou's Ami du roi.⁴ Voltaire's was a century of "wit, gaily and luxury." "If he had lived in a time of fanaticism, he would have been one of its most ardent apostles, following his prudent maxim that one should never run counter to public opinion and should always favor the passions of the moment: he only insulted religion to amuse the great, the rich, the women, and all the libertines to whom its yoke was very inconvenient." Royou, admitting that there was no man to whom the Assembly was more indebted as its precursor than to Voltaire, used this as a taunt:

The Revolution never could have taken place if the French people had conserved even a glimmering of common sense. Long

¹Vol. II, No. 45 (June 6, 1791), pp. 364-65.

²Letter to her brother, Paris, June 1, 1791, Pierre de Vaissière, Lettres d'"Aristocrates" (Paris, 1907), p. 287.

³No. 151 (May 31, 1791), pp. 601-02.

⁴(June 1, 1791), pp. 1-2.

before the Estates General was convoked the pamphlets and the jests of Voltaire had spoiled the mind and corrupted the heart of the youth; spread in all the kingdom the venom of impiety; introduced egotism, pride and ignorance; deteriorated and degraded the moral character of the nation; founded a sect murderous and destructive of virtues, of the arts and of talents. In the eyes of all men of sense, of all impartial philosophes, Voltaire is the greatest flail which has ever existed in Europe; he is the more formidable to society and to humanity since it has been demonstrated that religion and moeurs are the foundation of public prosperity. . . . The Assembly which dares, before the nation, consecrate, in the temple of the capital, the memory of a man whose very name alarms piety and decency, dishonors itself, dishonors the nation of which it is the interpreter, and proves to all Europe how incapable it is of legislating for a great empire, since it is ignorant of how much abuse of talents is contemptible and criminal, and of the nature of the influence of religion and moeurs on the government.

These protests did not stop the preparations for the celebration which had so long been under consideration, and which were now advanced with an intensity stimulated by certainty of fulfillment. The National Assembly had ordered the department of Paris to undertake the task, but these authorities delegated their power to Charon's committee which had been studying the project for the Commune of Paris since March.

